



A NEW BOOK ON INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL DISPLACEMENT

Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival. Edited by Lynda Mannik. New York, NY: Berghahn, 2018. Pp viii, 279. Index. ISBN: 978-1785331015

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Abstract

During the First World War, an estimated 10 million people, mostly in Europe, were displaced internally and internationally. With the 'free to migrate concept', refugees' resettlement across Europe was considered peaceful, as hospitable host nations received people fleeing from war and violence. By the Second World War, the idea of 'free migration' of refugees was discarded, as approximately 11-20 million people, mostly in Europe, fled genocide, ethnic cleansing, and violent military attacks. The hatred for displaced peoples, which was prompted by Nazi Germany's extermination of six million Jews, garnered enough sympathy to resettle those fleeing into the United States and other countries in Europe. By the end of the 1980s, BS Chimni argues that refugee flows in Europe and those from the Global South were perceived as different – a concept he terms 'The Myth of Difference'. The Myth Of Difference is apparent in the prejudice that guided the conceptual framework of the international refugee law regime, where displaced peoples outside of Europe were blatantly excluded from the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951.

Keywords

Migration, refugees, migrants, boat migration, memory, trauma, asylum seekers

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Lynda Mannik, a lecturer in Cultural Anthropology at York University, shines a light on one of the diciest topic areas in the field of global migration. As the sole editor of *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival*, Mannik and her co-authors confront the devastating wound of ongoing discrimination and derogation faced by desperate migrants in search of survival, whose last or only chance of surviving may be travelling by boat. The book’s introduction opens with a narration of the treacherous journeys made by displaced Estonians in 1948 on board the ship the SS Walnut. Despite the desperation, imminent risks, and dehumanisation that characterise the harsh reality of being uprooted, upon their arrival, refugees are unwelcomed, seen as a threat, and associated with natural disaster through their being ‘washed away’, ‘engulfed’, ‘flooded’, and ‘swamped’ by the oceans and seas.

Throughout the book, the authors argue that pejorative labels such as ‘boat people’, ‘tides’, ‘waves’, and ‘floods’ are used to exemplify the ‘unexpected’ and ‘uncontrolled’ arrival of people who travel by boat as illegal, smugglers, and human traffickers. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner (1986), once said, ‘[y]ou shall know that no one is illegal, it is a contradiction in itself. People can be beautiful or even more beautiful. They may be just or unjust. But illegal? How can someone be illegal?’ It is the centrality of this question of the illegality and criminality of people who travel by boat that the authors of Mannik’s edited volume problematises. Often traumatised, marginalised, and discriminated against by nationalist preference for a homogenous system, the pages of *Migration by Boat* innovatively challenge apathy, humanitarian ideals and unfair treatment against a people in search of protection.

Broken down into four major themes, the chapters are diverse, including case studies, artistic creativity, and scholarly interpretation of cultures and identities in a realistic way. The interdisciplinarity of the chapters cuts across refugee and migration studies, media and communications, cultural studies, anthropology, geography/border studies, history, memory, law and policy, all in the hope of impacting the decision-making processes involving people who travel by boat. Notably, the term ‘displaced person’ is not used in the book, instead, refugee, asylum seeker, migrant, and illegal migrant, many of whom are forcibly displaced both internally and internationally, are referenced throughout the 13 chapters.

¹ BS Chimni, ‘The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: A View from the South’, (1998) 11 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, 350-374.

Theme One: Water as Ambiguous Space

Chapters 3, 5, 8, and 12 discuss water as an unrestricted, transitional, and de-territorialised space for migrant movement. Yet, this oceanic space has the ability to wash away human lives without a trace. The idea of flow and liminality are fed by Western obsession with binarism and categorical order of nation-states, where refugees are objectified, seen as occupying a space that lies between their homelands yet is external to other nations - they do not belong anywhere but are everywhere (Introduction, p. 6). Vinh Nguyen, Assistant Professor, McMaster University, contends that Vietnamese diaspora use aqueous spaces to represent, imagine, and negotiate the painful experience of history, memory, and identity (ch. 3, p. 66). University of Adelaide Research Professor, Jennifer Rutherford, uses the literary analogy of J. M Coetzee's allegorical concept of 'washed clean' to unveil Australia's 'policies of detention, deterrence, pushback and excision' against asylum seekers (ch. 5, p. 101).

Federico Oliveri, Research Associate at the University of Pisa, demonstrates how Tunisian migrants repoliticised deadly migration across the Mediterranean Sea by questioning the dominant Eurocentric migration regime (ch. 8, p. 155). Papa Sow, Elina Marmer, and Jurgen Scheffran, draw on qualitative interviews to highlight the complex relationships formed amongst migrants and between migrants and their organisers while en route, as '[p]romiscuity, privacy, and confidentiality become the unifying elements that bind adventures...' (ch. 12, p. 236).

Theme Two: Trauma Versus Agency

This section grapples with the idea that the only agency refugees have ever had is founded on a refugee nexus of fear and protection that resonates with the label of being 'illegal'. This 'fear of being prosecuted', delineated in the Refugee Convention 1951, ensures that all other forms of refugees (e.g., economic, trafficked persons, or climate change refugees) are unaccepted, hence do not deserve humanitarian assistance, especially when they 'jump the queue' as boat arrivals. Although the desperation and associated trauma borne by people travelling by boat is so horrendous that it lasts a lifetime, refugees are unable to claim any agency for themselves in such a devastating situation most likely long after they have been resettled to a somewhat 'normal' life. Memorial University Professor, Sharon Roseman, summarises how the history of child labour migration came to be memorialised in fictional children's books through the memory activism movement between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries (ch. 1, p. 27).

Kim Tao, a curator at the Australian National Maritime Museum, presents a critical examination of how migration by boat has been displayed at the National Maritime Museum in Australia. Tao explores 'interpretive possibilities of historic vessels, digital technology, and contemporary art' of migration by boat (ch. 2, p. 49). Karina Horsti, a Fellow at the University of Jyväskylä, argues that contemporary art provides a critical space for negotiating conflict and mediation in recognising the complexity of violence and injustice occurring at European borders. Titled, 'If We Die, We Die Together,' Sue Hoffman, Honorary Research Associate at Murdoch University, recounts the horrifying journeys of refugees migrating by boat and their relations with smugglers (ch. 11, p. 219).

Linda Briskman, Swinburne University of Technology Professor, and Michelle Dimasi, PhD student at Swinburne University of Technology, narrate the appalling crash of the *Janga* in Australian territorial waters while it was carrying 221 passengers, including 15 children. With only 41 survivors, Briskman and Dimasi lament that, '[t]he silencing of survivor voices and privileging of more-powerful declarations can be understood by the trope of boats and ensuing fear and politics' (ch. 13, p. 253).

Theme Three: Control and Protectionism

This section highlights the irony of international refugee law, which mandates the protection of refugees, yet states only do so on a voluntary basis. Often left in limbo because the powers that be are in full control of inventing and re-inventing their citizenship, states continue to prejudice, racialise, and securitise refugees, ultimately deciding who can or cannot enter. Without agency, refugees are perceived as a voiceless and helpless drove of people aimed at destroying intact homeland security. Sensationalised by the media, refugee stories are usually altered to taint the facts, erasing their contribution to host countries' economics and downplaying the demand for cheap labour from the Global South.

Daniele Salerno, Post-doctoral Research Fellow at University of Bologna, discusses the military interception of Kater I *Rades*, an Albanian boat carrying ~120 people fleeing from civil unrest, which resulted in its sinking, causing 81 people to die. Since then, southern European borders have been gradually militarized as the Mediterranean has turned into a site of mass graves for migrants travelling by boat (ch. 7, pp. 135-136). The Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University, Professor Helen Hintjens, uses media reporting to expose how small islands in Europe symbolically depict an image of safety, protection and refuge on the one hand, and places of horror, rejection, isolation and death on the other.

Theme Four: Memory: Personal and Public

Flashbacks, dreams, cold sweats, and post-traumatic stress disorder are all reminiscent of refugees' experiences of trauma. Mainly as a survivor mechanism, '[t]rauma kills memory and meaning. (...) The relationship between trauma and memory is complex. For example, symptoms of posttraumatic stress can dissipate over time, yet acute memories and extreme memories can lie dormant for a lifetime' (*Introduction*, p. 13). David Alvarez, Professor at Grand Valley State University, shows how the figurations of small vessels crossing the Strait of Gibraltar 'implicitly context the priorities of current cross-Mediterranean mobility regimes' (ch. 6, p. 117). In chapter 9, Mannik details the arrival of the *Amelie* in Canada in 1987. 173 men and one woman were relocated at the Canadian Forces Bases, and after they were taken away by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and detained for 16 days (ch. 9, p. 178-179). Mannik's illustration of the *Amelie* underscores how 'news images and reports can set in motion individual and collective action...' (ch. 9, p. 179).

'Overall, the authors in this volume demonstrate how pain and trauma can be intimately linked to creativity and agency' (*Introduction*, p. 15). This sensitive, yet critical, collection recounts the devastation experienced at land and sea by people travelling by boat. The variety of perspectives presented here confronts pejorative tone, and challenges dominant Western host nations' laws and policies, while at the same time invoking an empathy that is raw, realistic, compassionate, and hopeful. The book will attract anyone who studies, teaches, researches, practices, or advocates in the area of migration studies, especially those travelling by boat.